

THE REALITY OF TASAWUF

By one of the most profound scholars of 20th Century

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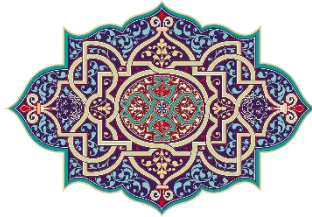
WITH THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST GRACIOUS, THE MOST MERCIFUL

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WHAT DOES 'TASAWWUF' DEAL WITH?



The question of the legitimacy of what has come to be known among the Muslims as *tasawwuf* (or mysticism) is often passionately debated among its proponents and opponents. When we look at the subject of *tasawwuf* and its objectives, it becomes plainly evident that these are completely in keeping with Islamic teachings.

Goals of Tasawwuf

The subject of *tasawwuf* and its goals can be summarized as follows:

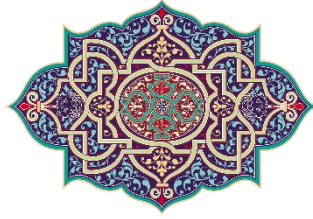
- ✦ Salvation from ignorance and attainment of gnosis (*Ma`arifah*);
- ✦ Refinement and purification of the self (*Tazkiyah Al-Nafs*);
- ✦ Cleansing of the spiritual heart (*Tasfiyah Al-Qalb*) and the enlightenment of the soul (*Tajliyah Al-Ruh*);
- ✦ Sincerity and devotion to the Creator (*Ikhlas*) and detachment from material and worldly concerns (*Zuhd*); and
- ✦ Commitment to the service of all the creatures of God.

This last point has been beautifully summed up in a Persian couplet by Shaikh Sa`di, which could be translated as follows:

*The essence of tariqah is not to be found,
In the rosary, or the prayer rug, or the Sufi cloak.
It is the service to God's creatures in which,
You will find its true meaning manifest.*

It is patently clear that these objectives of *tasawwuf* are also the objectives of Islam. Consequently, as far as the subject and goals of *tasawwuf* are concerned, they cannot be separated from the objectives and goals of Islam.

THE TERM TASAWWUF AND ITS ORIGIN



The key Issue

While the goals of *tasawwuf* are completely in keeping with the goals of Islam, a critical study of the subject reveals that the practical *Sufi* methodologies developed to attain these objectives contain significant departures from the methodology outlined by authentic Islamic teachings. An understanding of this departure and the contrast in methodology must begin with an understanding of the departure in terminology.

Origins of the term ‘Tasawwuf’

The term *tasawwuf* is a foreign term that has been introduced into the vocabulary of Islam from without. It is found neither in the Qur’an nor in the *Hadith* literature, the latter being a record of the sayings and deeds of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and his Companions (RAA). While this point may appear to be nothing more than pedantic nitpicking, its implications have been devastating and far-reaching. Not only is the term *tasawwuf* not found in the primary sources of Islam, but its actual origin also remains a topic of debate. This word made its appearance in the language of Islam towards the end of the second century *Hijrah*. Meer Valiuddin has even identified the exact year when this word first appeared—822 C.E.¹ The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ had passed away in 632 C.E., and the *Hijrah* took place in 622 C.E. Therefore, this word appeared in the Islamic lexicon exactly 190 years (or 196 years according to the lunar calendar) after the demise of the Holy Prophet ﷺ.

Origins of the term ‘Sufi’

There are four different opinions regarding the origin of the word *Sufi*. The rules of Arabic grammar, however, make three of the four opinions untenable. These are summarized below:

¹ Dr. Mir Valiuddin was Professor of Philosophy at Osmania University, Hyderabad (India). He has identified the year 822 C. E. on the authority of Imam Qushayri. Cf., Valiuddin, Dr. Mir., *Qur’anic Sufism* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, n.d.), 3.

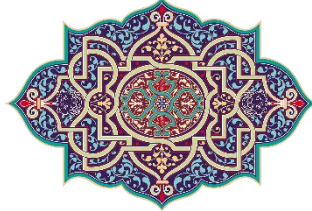
- ✧ The first opinion is that its root word is *safa* (cleansing), but, grammatically speaking, the word *Sufi* cannot be derived from *safa*; the proper derivation is *safavi*.
- ✧ Another opinion is that its root word is *saff* (row or rank), but this is also implausible because the derived word is *saffi* (one who is standing in a row) and not *Sufi*.
- ✧ A third opinion is that its root word is *suffah* (platform), but the word *Sufi* cannot be derived from this root word either—the proper derivation being *suffi*.
- ✧ A fourth opinion is that its root word is *soof* (wool). This opinion is widely accepted and there is some validity in this argument. Firstly, the word *Sufi* can be derived from *soof* according to the rules of Arabic grammar. Secondly, it is related to the practice of the early *Sufis* who used to wear woolen clothing as a sign of their detachment from and discomfort with the material world. The early *Sufis* wore the rough woolen cloak without any undergarments, so that there would be constant irritation on the skin. This pricking of skin by the wool would keep the *Sufi* in discomfort that would serve as a constant reminder that the seeker has nothing to do with the comforts of this world, his only goal being to please Allah (SWT). There is a near consensus that the word *Sufi* is derived from *soof*, and this is an acceptable position as far as the rules of Arabic grammar are concerned.

In this regard, my personal opinion had been that the word *tasawwuf* was derived from the Greek word *sophia*, meaning wisdom. It has recently come to my attention that although this view was favored by a number of Western experts in Islamic studies earlier in the century, it has now been shown to be untenable.² The most likely derivation, therefore, is from the word *soof*.

The bottom line in this discussion, however, is the fact that the origin of the word *tasawwuf* in the language of Islam has always been a topic of debate, and its origin has not been definitively established. Even more certain than this is the fact that this word is nowhere to be found in the primary sources of Islam: the Holy Qur'an and the *Hadith* literature.

² Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 14. William Stoddart (Sidi Imran Yahya), *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1981), 20.

A HIMALAYAN MISTAKE AND ITS DISASTROUS CONSEQUENCES



The introduction of the word *tasawwuf* into the language of Islam has produced two disastrous results. The first is the alienation from, and indifference to, a very important Qur’anic and Prophetic term; the second is the hostility towards *tasawwuf* among those who are loyal and committed to the terminology of the Qur’an and the words of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

1. Indifference to an Important Qur’anic and Prophetic Term

The first of the two disastrous consequences of the introduction of the term *tasawwuf* into the language of Islam was that Muslims became virtually ignorant of an extremely important Qur’anic and Prophetic term. Keeping in mind the fact that the objectives and goals of *tasawwuf* are totally in keeping with the teachings and spirit of Islam, it is only natural to assume that Islam has a specific word or term to signify that which has come to be known as *tasawwuf*. In fact, the language of the Qur’an and the words of the Prophet ﷺ do indeed contain such a term, viz. *Ihsan*. Although the word *Ihsan* can mean doing good to another person, it is primarily a very significant Islamic term. Unfortunately, since the word *tasawwuf* has become prevalent and widely accepted, the use of the authentic Islamic term *Ihsan* practically disappeared from the discourse of the Muslims. Consequently, although the word *Ihsan* has been used in the Qur’an and *Hadith* in a very profound sense, its actual usage by the Muslims became very limited and truncated. In other words, the term *tasawwuf* usurped an important conceptual dimension of Islam that is defined by the term *Ihsan*.

Distortion in the meaning of the term *Ihsan*

Since the term *Ihsan* was supplanted by *tasawwuf*, the meaning of *Ihsan* in actual usage became limited only to benevolent and charitable behavior towards another person. The Qur’an does use *Ihsan* in this sense: “...and do *Ihsan* to others as Allah has done *Ihsan* to you...” (Al-Qassas 28:77). However, the literal meaning of *Ihsan* is related to its root—h-s-

n—which denotes “beauty,” and therefore it is used in the sense of adding the element of beauty to a thing or task, i.e., to adorn or beautify something. For instance, consider the following *hadith*, in which this word is used in its literal sense. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Part of the beauty of an individual’s Islam is that he gives up all useless [and unproductive] activities.” In other words, one aspect of the beauty of Islamic behavior is to avoid wasting one’s time in diversions that provide no benefit for this world or for the Hereafter. In other *ahadith* too, the word *Ihsan* is used by the Prophet ﷺ to denote the performance of an action in the best possible manner—doing something with full attention, putting one’s heart into it, and taking care of the small details. This, in short, is the essence of the word *Ihsan* when it is used in its literal sense.

In addition to its literal meaning mentioned above, the word *Ihsan* has also been used in the Holy Qur’an as well as in the sayings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in a very particular sense; this special usage of the word *Ihsan* has had the effect of turning an Arabic word into a very important Islamic term. Conceived as a pivotal locution, the meaning of *Ihsan* is intimately and organically related to two other fundamental Islamic terms—*Islam* and *Iman*—as described below.

The relationship between Islam, Iman and Ihsan

In the famous *hadith* of Gabriel (AS), the first three questions asked by the Archangel refer to the essence of *Islam*, *Iman*, and *Ihsan*. The important point to note here is that, even though the *hadith* of Gabriel (AS) is among the most well-known and often repeated Prophetic sayings, Muslims have become practically ignorant of the fact that *Ihsan* is a central Islamic concept that is organically related to *Islam* and *Iman*. This is a reflection of the fact that their understanding of the word *Ihsan* has become extremely limited and truncated. The *hadith* of Gabriel (AS) is as follows:

Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (RAA) reports: One day when we were with Allah’s Messenger ﷺ, a man with very white clothing and very black hair came up to us. No mark of travel was visible on him, and none of us recognized him. Sitting down beside the Prophet ﷺ, leaning his knees against his and placing his hands on his thighs, he said: “Tell me, Muhammad ﷺ, about Islam.” He replied: “Islam means that you should testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad ﷺ is Allah’s Messenger, that you should observe the prayer, pay the Zakat, fast during Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to go there.” He said: “You have spoken the truth.” We were surprised at his questioning him and then declaring that he spoke the truth. He said: “Now tell me about Iman.” He replied: “It means that you should believe in Allah (SWT), His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and that you should believe in the decreeing both of good and evil.” Remarking that he had spoken the truth, he then said: “Now tell me about Ihsan.” He replied: “It means that you should worship Allah (SWT) as though you see Him, for He sees you though you do not see Him.” He said: “Now tell me about the Hour.” He replied: “The one who is asked

about it is no better informed than the one who is asking.” He said: “Then tell me about its signs.” He replied: “That a maid-servant should beget her mistress, and that you should see barefooted, naked, poor men and shepherds exalting themselves in buildings.” [Umar] says: He then went away, and after I had waited for a long time, [the Prophet] said to me: “Do you know who the questioner was, Umar?” I replied: “Allah and His Messenger know best.” He said: “He was Gabriel who came to you to teach you your religion.” (Narrated by Bukhari)

In this connection, note that the following Qur’anic *ayah* also reflects the relationship between *Islam*, *Iman*, and *Ihsan* :

Those who have attained to Iman [faith] and do righteous deeds incur no blame by partaking of whatever they may have [in the past], so long as they are conscious of Allah and have Iman and do righteous deeds, and continue to be conscious of Allah and have [true] Iman, and then grow ever more conscious of Allah and do [reach the level of] Ihsan; and Allah loves those who have attained to Ihsan. (Al-Mai’dah 5:93)

Dogmatic and the Real Iman

In order to appreciate the wisdom contained in this *ayah*, and to understand why the word *Iman* is used repeatedly, we need to differentiate between legal or dogmatic *Iman* on the one hand and actual or real *Iman* on the other.

- ✽ Legal, dogmatic faith is that which is uttered by the tongue, by virtue of which an individual enters the community of Islam. Having become conscious of Allah (SWT), the individual verbally accepts the Islamic creed and begins to live his or her life according to the Islamic *Shari`ah*. At this stage, the individual is a legal Muslim and his or her behavior falls under the category of “righteous deeds” to the degree that it is in accordance with the *Shari`ah*. In other words, when an individual verbally attests to the verity of the Islamic creed and shapes his or her behavior according to the *Shari`ah*, that individual is said to have entered the fold of “obedience” to Allah (SWT) or *Islam*; he or she has, in effect, given up resistance and surrendered before the orders of the Almighty Lord. At the level of *Islam*, however, the verbal acceptance of the Islamic creed is not necessarily reflective of what is in the individual’s heart regarding that which he or she has uttered with the tongue. Nonetheless, verbal attestation and righteous behavior do indeed heighten the individual’s consciousness of Allah (SWT), and he or she becomes prepared to move to the next stage.
- ✽ When an individual’s heart genuinely understands and freely accepts that which the tongue has uttered, and this understanding and utterance continues to be complemented by righteous deeds which correspondingly improve in sincerity and elegance, then that individual is said to have attained genuine and true *Iman*. At this

stage, the statement of faith is not merely a dogmatic, theological assertion but a living and life-giving conviction. When there is no discrepancy between what is uttered by the tongue, what is manifested in action, and what is believed in the heart, then the level of *Iman* has been reached.

The Apex of Religious Journey - Ihsan

It appears that *Iman* constitutes the apex of the religious journey, but this is clearly not the case. The fore-cited Qur’anic *ayah* and the referenced Prophetic *hadith* make it clear that there is a third stage beyond *Islam* and *Iman*, and this is the stage of *Ihsan*. With the consciousness of Allah (SWT) being heightened further at the level of *Iman*, the individual is prepared to enter the stage of *Ihsan*. Consequently, *Ihsan* constitutes the apex of the religious journey in Islam—a stage where the consciousness of the believer becomes so acute that, metaphorically speaking, Allah (SWT) is always before the eyes of the believer.

From the Qur’anic and Prophetic point of view, therefore, *Ihsan* represents the zenith of spiritual development. This stage marks complete deliverance from ignorance and darkness and the attainment of gnosis. At this stage, the individual self or ego becomes so cultured and purified that it becomes capable of beholding directly the true nature of reality. The heart is also cleansed, and the light of the human spiritual soul enlightens the whole being of the person. The individual sees nothing but Divine Love, Majesty, and Beauty in the created universe and therefore selflessly devotes him/herself to the service of God’s creatures. In serving the creatures, he or she expects nothing in return from those being served but only heightened awareness of the Creator. In other words, the level of *Ihsan* can be referred to as being the objective and goal of *tasawwuf*.

A very important *hadith* sheds further light on the displacement of the term *Ihsan* by the term *tasawwuf*. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “Whenever an innovation is introduced into the *Deen* it is inevitable that an authentic Prophetic practice is displaced.” This *hadith* clearly states that every innovation in religion invariably replaces a *Sunnah* and, in the context of the present discussion, we see how the word *tasawwuf* has displaced the genuinely Islamic term *Ihsan*.

2. Hostility towards Tasawwuf

In my opinion, the second disastrous outcome of the displacement of the term *Ihsan* by the term *tasawwuf* has been even more damaging. An attitude of aversion towards *tasawwuf* developed among certain enthusiasts committed to the Qur’an and *Sunnah*. The result of this reaction against *tasawwuf* was an overemphasis on the externalities of Islam—the specific, minute details of religious rituals and dogma. In other words, most of the emphasis was placed on the exoteric and formal dimension of Islam, whereas its esoteric and spiritual dimension began to disappear from view. Although the aversion was initiated by the label

of *tasawwuf*, which was perceived alien and therefore inauthentic, it is important to note that other significant factors contributed in this regard too, as discussed later. In this context, the personality of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (RA) is the most prominent manifestation of the aversion towards *tasawwuf*.

How the Tasawwuf is different from other Islamic sciences

When it is argued that *tasawwuf*, as it is found among the Muslims, is a product of the post-Prophetic period, the point is countered by noting that many other areas of Islamic studies are also products of the post-Prophetic era. In this regard, it should be noted that the titles or labels of other areas of Islamic studies have been derived from the Qur'an and *hadith*. The word *tasawwuf* is unique among all other fields of Islamic studies because it is the only title or label that cannot be located in the Qur'anic or Prophetic vocabulary. For example, the word *tafseer* (Qur'anic exegesis) is used by the Qur'an itself, and it was in usage among the Companions (RAA). The word *hadith* is also used by the Qur'an to describe itself—the Qur'an is the *hadith* of Allah (SWT)—although the term *hadith*, as it came to be used later, refers to the speech and actions of the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions (RAA). In the same way, the word *fiqh* is found in certain sayings of the Holy Prophet (RAA), where it refers to a proper and profound understanding of Islamic teachings. These areas of Islamic scholarship locate their titles or labels in Qur'anic and/or Prophetic vocabulary. In stark contrast, however, the title or label of *tasawwuf* is nowhere to be found in these primary sources. Consequently, the assertion that *tasawwuf* is just like other areas of Islamic studies is totally baseless.

It is only natural that an individual who has a deep attachment to the Qur'an and *Sunnah* would feel some reservations regarding the word *tasawwuf*, especially when it is asserted that *tasawwuf* represents the “soul of Islam.” It is strange indeed that the label of something claiming such a noble stature cannot be found in the vocabulary of the primary sources of Islam. While the alien and unknown origin of this word produces reservations and doubts, the fact that foreign ideas and concepts influenced the development of *Sufi* thought further intensifies this reservation until it leads to outright aversion.

Aversion towards Tasawwuf – An analysis of reform efforts of Revivalist movements

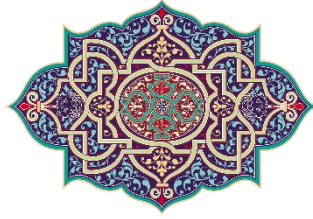
It has been noted that Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (RA) is the most notable example of an individual who manifests aversion towards *tasawwuf*. However, I still include him among the reformers of Islam. Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (RA) made significant headway in purging the religious practices and beliefs of the Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula of innovative and un-Islamic elements. He also eradicated many of the un-Islamic cultural norms that had taken on the veneer of religiosity among the Arabs. It must also be acknowledged that he made significant achievements in presenting an authentic and purified

version of the exoteric and ritualistic dimension of Islam. Therefore, he must be included among the reformers of the Muslim *Ummah*.

However, if we compare his accomplishments to his Indian contemporary, Shah Waliullah Dehlvi (RA), it is obvious that there is no comparison between the two. Shah Waliullah (RA) accomplished at both the esoteric and exoteric levels what Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (RA) could only achieve at the exoteric level. Shah Waliullah's work in philosophy, spirituality, and social thought is unparalleled by any other thinker from either the classical or the medieval age of Islam. In other words, the work and personality of Shah Waliullah (RA) are much more holistic, integrated, and versatile than that of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (RA).

Here it should be noted that the ideas and achievements of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (RA) are at least partially responsible for the almost total disregard for the spiritual dimension of Islam that is a defining characteristic of modern Islamic revivalist movements. For the modern-day revivalists, the accomplishments of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (RA) have remained a model of a successful effort to restore the *Shari`ah* of Islam after a long period of decay. Even though the support of the House of Sa`ud was indispensable for his mission, the fact that his reformist movement did attain success in implementing the Islamic Law made the Najdi Movement an ideal for the later-day Muslim revivalists—and they inherited the aversion towards *tasawwuf* that was so characteristic of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab's thought.

THE PROPHETIC AND QUR’ANIC METHODOLOGY



Having made these preliminary remarks, we now turn to the subject itself. It has already been noted that the objectives which *tasawwuf* sets forth are in complete harmony with Islamic teachings. The real question that needs to be addressed at this stage is this: What is the Qur’anic and Prophetic guidance regarding the actual method of obtaining the objectives of *tasawwuf*? It is obvious that the methodology that is faithful to the guidance contained in the Qur’an and *Sunnah* would be not only the Prophetic way but also the way that appeals to human reason.

Difference between accountability and obligation

The first point to note in this regard is the principle that the call of religion is primarily addressed to the *individual*. This point can be understood with the help of the following metaphor: Each individual is a robust seed that has been planted by Allah (SWT) in His garden (the earth). Obviously, the Gardener wishes that every seed in His garden should sprout, mature, and produce beautiful flowers and fruits. In other words, Allah (SWT) wishes to see the fruition of all the potentialities that are inherent in each individual, and to see the individuality of each person blossom in its full glory. In this regard, a Persian couplet by Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil is very instructive, which could be translated as follows:

It is a shame that your baser self impels you to seek serenity in the gardens and meadows of the outside world; Your own inner being is no less than a blossoming bud, Open the door of your heart and step into the inner garden!

The meaning of this couplet is that the beauty and serenity of the garden within are much more attractive than the beauty and serenity of the gardens without, only if we take the time and effort to look for this hidden, inward beauty. It is worth repeating that, in the eyes of Allah (SWT), each individual is a work in progress, a seed that has been planted. Allah (SWT) wishes to see this seed sprout and go through all the stages of maturation so that all of its potentialities are realized and all of its inner beauty is manifested. In this regard, it is important to bring to mind the following *ayah* from Surah Al-Mai’dah:

O you who believe! It is [only] for your own selves that you are responsible. If you follow the right path, those who have gone astray will not be able to do you harm.... (Al-Mai'dah 5:105)

While it is obligatory to call others to the Divine Word, the believer will not be judged according to the number of individuals who responded to the call. Instead, the believer will be judged solely on the basis of his or her own efforts to fulfill the religious obligations. It is an important Islamic obligation to minister to others, to make others aware of the Divine Word, and to invite them to shape their lives according to Divine Guidance. But in spite of all these obligations, the individual believer remains accountable for no one other than him/herself. As for those to whom the believer has called towards Divine Guidance and who did not respond to the call, the following words of the Qur'an are highly instructive:

...and you will not be held accountable for those who are destined for the blazing fire. (Al-Baqarah 2:119)

The fore-cited *ayah* of Surah Al-Mai'dah has been misinterpreted, and this happened even during the period of the Companions (RAA). Taking this *ayah* in isolation from other *ayaat* and Prophetic injunctions, an opinion began to be expressed that since each individual is responsible for none other than him/herself, there is no need to make any efforts to spread the word of Islam. It is obvious that, even among this early generation of Muslims, there were many hypocrites and people with weak faith who wanted to cut corners regarding their religious obligations; one easy way to do this was to take a particular *ayah* out of context and in isolation from other religious instructions. In response to this errant reading of this *ayah*, Abu Bakr (RA) made it a point to explicate its proper meaning in a sermon. He stated that the words "[only] for your own selves are you responsible" do not absolve the individual from his or her religious obligations of spreading the word of Islam, enjoining righteousness, and forbidding evil. There is no doubt that each individual is accountable for only his or her own actions and not for the actions of anyone else, but the issue of accountability cannot be confused with the issue of obligations towards others. In other words, just because one is not accountable for the actions of others does not mean that he or she does not have any obligations towards them. The Qur'an records the following words of Prophet Musa (AS) regarding his despair over the behavior of his people after they refused to fight for the cause of Allah (SWT):

[Musa] said: O Lord! I have authority over none but myself and my brother [Harun] (Al-Mai'dah 5:25).

Even here, Prophet Musa (AS) mentions having authority over his brother Harun (AS) only because the latter had willingly accepted his authority, otherwise it is obvious that an individual does not have any control even over his or her own sibling. The following *ayah* sheds further light on this subject:

[O Prophet!] Verily, you cannot guide everyone whom you love, but it is Allah who guides whomever He Wills.... (Al-Qasas 28:56).

Progression in one's consciousness towards Allah swt

As one's faith increases in depth and intensity, the believer begins to feel that he or she is actually "seeing" Allah (SWT). Even if this level is not reached, there should at least be a constant and perpetual awareness on the part of the believer that Allah (SWT) is definitely watching him/her. This awareness of "seeing" and being "seen" is the highest level of faith that has been called *Ihsan* in Qur'anic and Prophetic terminology. Our language can only do partial justice in precisely describing the actual inner state that is signified by the term *Ihsan*. We can do no better than to say that, in this state, faith reaches a level where the individual begins to "see" the spiritual and unseen dimensions of reality before his or her own eyes. This produces a degree of certainty in the faith of the believer that is akin to the certainty that is achieved by seeing something by one's own eyes. Indeed, it is not possible to explain this state in any other terms. Faith reaches such a degree of intensity at this level that, in the words of the Prophet ﷺ "...you worship Allah as if you actually see Him, for if you don't actually see Him, He certainly sees you."

The Relationship between Allah (SWT) and the Believer

The cognizance of Divine Companionship that is the hallmark of *Ihsan* results in a *bilateral* relationship between the believer and Almighty Allah (SWT), a relationship that has several dimensions. These dimensions can be understood by pondering over a number of words that appear in the Qur'an with reference to a true believer, and the same words are also used for Almighty Allah (SWT) as well, alluding to the reciprocal nature of this relationship.

- ✎ Firstly, there is mutual *wilayah* or friendship. Allah (SWT) is the Friend and Guardian of those who believe (Al-Baqarah 2:257), and similarly, all pious believers are the friends of Allah (Yunus 10:62, 63).
- ✎ Secondly, there is mutual *nusrah* or help and support. The Qur'an makes it clear: "O you who believe! If you help Allah, He will help you..." (Muhammad 47:7). To "help" Allah (SWT) is to take part in the struggle for His Cause, and, in return, the believers can expect that Allah (SWT) will make them steadfast and persevere in the struggle and that He will not abandon them.
- ✎ Thirdly, there is mutual *zikr* or remembrance. We read in the Qur'an: "Therefore remember Me, (and) I will remember you..." (Al-Baqarah 2:152). To remember Allah (SWT) is to pray and glorify Him and to remain forever conscious of Him. In

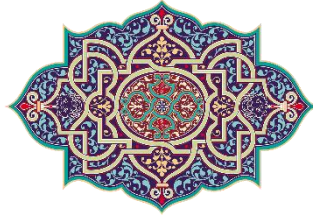
return, Allah (SWT) will not ignore and disregard the believer or be indifferent to his or her supplications, but will shower His Mercy on the believer.

- ✎ Fourthly, there is mutual *shukr*, or gratitude from the servant and appreciation from the Lord. The Qur'an proclaims: "...whoever is grateful, truly his gratitude is for (the good of) his own self..." (Al-Namal 27:40); and "...Allah is Appreciative, All-Knowing" (Al-Baqarah 2:158).
- ✎ Fifthly, there is mutual *taubah*, or turning to each other with loving attention. This connotes repentance on the part of the servant and acknowledgment and acceptance from the Lord. Again we read: "O you who believe! Turn to Allah with sincere repentance..." (Al-Tahreem 66:8); and "...Verily, He is the One Who accepts the repentance and Who forgives" (Al-Nasr 110:3).
- ✎ Sixthly, Almighty Allah (SWT) and the believer gradually come closer and closer to each. Although it is the Creator Himself who provides a greater share in the growth of this spiritual intimacy, yet the believer is required to take the initiative. This is explained in a tradition thus:

Abu Hurairah (RAA) reports that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: Allah (SWT) says: "I am just as My servant thinks I am (i.e., I do for him what he thinks I can do for him), and I am with him if He remembers Me. If he remembers Me in his heart, I too remember him in My heart; if he remembers Me in a group of people, I remember him in a group that is better than they; if he comes one span nearer to Me, I go one cubit nearer to him; if he comes one cubit nearer to Me, I go a distance of two outstretched arms nearer to him; and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running." (Narrated by Imam Bukhari)

All the six dimensions of a positive and reciprocal relationship between Almighty Allah (SWT) and His servant, as described above, can be summed up in one word: mutual *love*. Allah (SWT) loves those who have reached the level of *Ihsan* (Al-Mai'dah 5:93) and the believers love Allah (SWT) more than anything and anyone else (Al-Baqarah 2:165).

MEANS OF ACQUIRING FAITH



The kind of relationship between Allah (SWT) and the believer that is characterized by mutual love cannot be attained without a healthy and vibrant faith. It would be useful to briefly discuss here the three different means of acquiring faith. I have discussed this issue in detail elsewhere; for now, a brief account should suffice.

3 ways of attaining faith

Company of the righteous

One way of attaining and increasing one's faith is to keep the company of those individuals whose faith has reached the level of certainty. The individuals who have reached the level of *Ihsan* radiate a passion and serenity that affects all those who come close to them. One who is sitting near a blazing fire cannot but feel its heat; similarly, when an individual is in the company of such noble souls he or she cannot but be affected by the warmth of faith, sincerity, and certitude that is emanating from them.

Devoted observance

The second means of attaining and increasing one's faith is devoted observance of the *Shari`ah*. Constant commitment and sincere repetition of the prescribed duties in the *Shari`ah* gives rise to an inner state where the individual's faith begins to progress and develop in intensity.

Nurturing the intellectual dimension of faith

While the company of the righteous and the observance of *Shari`ah* are means of attaining and increasing one's faith, it must be noted that the faith that is gained through these means belongs to the kind known as "blind faith." This type of faith is usually devoid of an intellectual dimension, and the elements of careful thought and disciplined reflection are not

necessary components of this type of faith. Although blind faith can attain depth and intensity, it is deficient in its intellectual breadth and reach.

The kind of faith that combines depth and intensity with an intellectual element or conscious understanding can only be attained with the aid of the Revealed Word, the Holy Qur'an. Faith with an intellectual dimension rests upon conscious insight accessible to reason. In the words of the Qur'an:

Tell them plainly: "This is my way: I call you to Allah, on the basis of clear perception [or conscious insight] both I and those who follow me.... (Yusuf 12:108)

This kind of faith can only be attained by pondering and comprehending the wisdom of the Revealed Word, and by personally experiencing the harmony of the Qur'anic *ayaat* with the signs of Allah (SWT) in the natural world as well as those found within the human self. Faith with an intellectual dimension can neither be gained by the company of the righteous nor by the constant observance of the *Shari'ah*. Its only source is the Holy Qur'an.

Dimensions of faith

Concerning faith, it is important to distinguish between its *superiority* in degree, on the one hand, and its *beauty* or *elegance* on the other.

The dimension of 'Superiority' of faith

It has been unanimously accepted by the Muslims that the superiority (or *fadilah*) of faith that was attained by the Companions (RAA) cannot be matched by the faith of any other believer who comes after the Prophet ﷺ. The reason for this is the fact that the Companions (RAA) were in the company of the Prophet ﷺ himself, an individual who was the perfect embodiment of faith and certainty. They were in the presence of a furnace radiating the heat of faith, the likes of which human history will never see again. Being merely in the presence of the Prophet ﷺ gave the Companions' faith a level of intensity that simply cannot be matched.

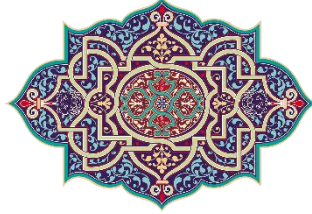
While all the Companions (RAA) shared this element of "blind faith," it must be kept in mind that among them there were many different kinds of personalities. While some of the Companions (RAA) did not progress beyond the level of "blind faith," there were many who reached the highest level of faith with an intellectual dimension. Those Companions (RAA) who were intellectually more sophisticated than others used the Qur'an to meet their intellectual needs, and thus their faith acquired an intellectual dimension as a result of their constructive engagement with the Divine Word.

The dimensions of ‘Elegance’ and ‘Beauty’ of faith

After comprehending the issue of *superiority*, we now move to the question of *beauty* or *elegance*. Once, when the Prophet ﷺ was sitting amidst his Companions (RAA), he asked: “In your estimation who possesses the most beautiful faith in all of creation?” On receiving the reply that they were the angels, the Prophet ﷺ said: “How is it that the angels not have faith when they are in the very presence of their Lord [and they directly witness the spiritual realities]?” Here the Prophet ﷺ is implying that while the intensity, depth, and completeness of the faith of the angels are beyond ken, their attainment of this faith is not such a remarkable accomplishment. Seeing that their first response was unsatisfactory, the Companions (RAA) gave a different response and suggested that they were the prophets of Allah (SWT). To this, the Prophet ﷺ said: “How is it that the prophets not have faith when Revelation is vouchsafed to them.” At this point, we can imagine that the Companions (RAA) must have hesitated somewhat before offering themselves as being the ones in all of creation who possess “the most beautiful faith.” To this, the Prophet ﷺ replied: “How is it that you should not have faith when I am present amongst you?” Then the Prophet ﷺ said: “The ones in all of creation who possess the most beautiful faith are those brothers of ours who will come after me [and they will not be blessed with my company]. They will find pages containing the Book of Allah ﷻ and they will believe in what they find therein.” This tradition has been reported by Abdullah bin Amr bin Al-Aas (RAA) and narrated by Imam Bayhaqi (RA).

This *hadith* makes it clear that there is something special about the Divine Word—it adds a dimension to the believer’s faith that cannot be attained from any other source. Although in the Muslim *Ummah* the most superior faith is that of the Companions (RAA), it is possible for those believers who were never blessed with the company of the Prophet ﷺ to acquire a faith that is beautiful, elegant, and fascinating. This is the faith with an intellectual dimension, and it can be acquired only by means of the Holy Qur’an.

THE REMEMBRANCE OF ALLAH (SWT) AND THE PLACE OF THE QUR'AN



The aim, it means, and the required outcome

Thus far we have ascertained that:

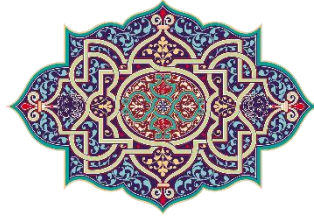
- ✎ The **aim** is to strengthen the *ruh*,
- ✎ The **means** is the remembrance of Allah (SWT), and
- ✎ The **outcome** is the attainment of faith.

Quran as a cornerstone for the remembrance of Allah swt

It can be inferred from the foregoing discussion that the Qur'an has a unique status in terms of the "remembrance" of Allah (SWT). Of the numerous names that the Qur'an uses to refer to itself, "The Remembrance" or "The Reminder" are used a number of times. This implies that the most authentic and effective ways of achieving "remembrance" of Allah (SWT) cannot but be rooted in the Qur'an.

It is well known that *Salah* (prayer) is one form of remembrance of Allah (SWT). However, it is worth noting that prayer is made up of two visible elements: the physical acts of standing, bowing, prostrating, and the recital of the Qur'anic *ayaat* that accompany these acts. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that the Qur'an refers to the *Fajr* prayer as *Qur'an Al-Fajr*. Similarly, the supererogatory night prayer of *tahajjud* is also meant for the extensive recitation of the Qur'an after midnight. Similarly, there are various supplications that the Prophet ﷺ used to recite in connection with everyday activities and ordered his Companions (RAA) to recite them as well. All these Prophetic supplications are also forms of remembrance of Allah (SWT).

LIBERATION OF SOUL AND ITS ONWARD JOURNEY



Enlightenment of Soul

At this point, it would be useful to translate the discussion that has taken place so far regarding *Tazkiyah Al-Nafs*, *Iman*, and *Ihsan* into the language of the *Sufis*. The *Sufis* use the term *Tajliyah Al-Ruh* (enlightenment of the spiritual soul) to describe this phenomenon of “remembrance.” Referring again to the parable of the sun and the sunbeam, the *Sufis* note that just like the sunbeam, the *ruh* also loses its vitality and luster for various reasons. The remembrance of Allah (SWT) is the only means of restoring this lost vitality and radiance; it is a means of restoring heat and vigor to something that has become cold and stagnant. The instrument for restoring to the *ruh* its lost vitality is the remembrance of Allah (SWT). We have already noted that the remembrance of Allah (SWT) is a state of the heart that is achieved primarily through the Qur’an, then through prayer and, finally, by means of the Prophetic supplications.

The Result of the “Liberation of Spirit”

For the *ruh* that has become animated, activated, and liberated from the shackles of *nafs*, the logical result is the commencement of a journey. This journey has been succinctly described by Plotinus as “the flight of the alone to The Alone.” Without suggesting anything more than a partial and imperfect resemblance between the two, we say that our *ruh* is solitary and lonely and so is Almighty Allah (SWT). The *ruh* is not related to anyone, it has no father, it is nobody’s offspring, and it has no spouse; all these relations are linked to the material body of the human being and not to the spiritual soul.

In modern philosophy, the term “alienation” has come to be widely used to describe this sense of loneliness and solitude. Indeed, these are the feelings experienced by any person who begins to develop intellectually and/or psychologically. In other words, the more an individual moves above the merely animal level, the more will be his or her consciousness of loneliness and solitude. Consequently, on the one hand, there is the unique individuality of

the *ruh* and, on the other hand, there is The One Who is absolutely Alone. There cannot even be an inkling of the slightest contamination in the “Oneness” of The One.

Now it is an established law of nature that everything has an inherent urge or tendency to return to its real source and origin, and therefore the direction of the spirit’s journey is towards its source: Almighty Allah (SWT). The *ruh* has been likened to a bird that has been imprisoned in the cage of the physical body. This bird is agitating to free itself and rise towards the heavens, and this has been symbolized by Plotinus as the “flight of the alone to The Alone.” We can add a little something to this symbolism by noting that it is the flight of “the finite alone” to “The Infinite Alone.” Two Persian couplets from Iqbal are instructive regarding this discussion:

*My heart burns on the loneliness of God!
In order, therefore, to maintain intact His Ego-Society
I sow in my dust the seed of selfhood
And keep a constant vigil over my “I.”*³

Summarizing the discussion thus far, the basic point to note is that the cultivation and strengthening of the *ruh* is an absolute must for every individual. The means for attaining this goal is *dhikr* or remembrance of Allah (SWT). The most potent means of attaining remembrance is the Qur’an, which describes itself as “The Remembrance,” then prayer, and finally the various Prophetic supplications. Remembrance of Allah (SWT) helps to enlighten the *ruh*, with the result that the depth and intensity of faith continue to develop until a stage is reached where the believer attains the level of *Ihsan*.

The Disciplining and Purification of the Nafs

The process of disciplining and purifying the *nafs* must accompany the efforts to nourish and strengthen the *ruh*. One has to engage in various exercises in order to culture the *nafs* so that it moves from craving libidinal gratification to being content and satisfied in the pursuit of higher ideals. Just as various exercises are required for training the vocal cords of the singer, the reflexes of the athlete, and the eyes of the physician, the disciplining of the *nafs* also requires certain exercises. Indeed, it is not possible to culture the *nafs* without undertaking an intense effort and steely determination.

Exercises for the purification of nafs

Establishment of salah:

³ English translation of these verses is by the poet himself. Cf., Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, “MacTaggart’s Philosophy,” Indian Art and Letters, 6, 1932. Included in Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal, edited by Syed Abdul Wahid, (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1964), 127.

Foremost among the exercises to discipline the *nafs* is the establishment of prayer. In general, prayer is a means of remembrance of Allah (SWT) and therefore it helps in strengthening the *ruh*. To establish regular prayer in a collective setting, on the other hand, is a very effective means of disciplining the *nafs*. Establishing the prayer five times a day in a *masjid* requires that a specific timetable be followed so that, in spite of all the distractions and difficulties of everyday life, one still manages to show up for the prayers regularly. In addition to the five obligatory prayers, there is the most esteemed of the supererogatory prayers, *tahajjud*. Here one has to get up in the middle of the night, although the *nafs* craves rest and sleep.

Fasting:

Secondly, there is the exercise of fasting in which one must abstain from two of the most potent physical needs, food and sex, from dawn to sunset.

Spending in the way of Allah swt:

The third exercise is spending one's hard earned money for the sake of Allah (SWT). Since the *nafs* wants to hold on to this wealth and lavish it on itself, it pains the *nafs* to see this wealth being "wasted" in charity.

Hajj:

The establishment of prayer, fasting, and spending for the sake of Allah (SWT) are all exercises that counter the demands of the *nafs* and thereby serve to weaken its hold on the heart. Note that the same goal is further achieved through two other religious obligations, each of which combines the features of the aforementioned three obligations. First, there is the obligation of *Hajj*. In *Hajj* there are specific requirements regarding *dhikr* and prayer, restrictions of *ihram*, the spending of wealth, as well as the risk and discomfort of a long journey.

Iqamah Al-Deen:

Second, there is the mission of spreading the word of Islam and struggling to establish it on the earth (*Iqamah Al-Deen*). This mission also brings with it a great deal of trials and tribulations that require the believer to control the demands of the *nafs*. A believer undertaking this mission has to face abusive language and insults, endure malicious propaganda, suffer the taunts of street urchins, and bear the pain of being described as charlatan or insane. The Prophet ﷺ himself had to listen to people calling him a liar, a mere poet, a possessed individual, a sorcerer, a demented person, a magician, and other such

things, all because he was calling the people towards Islam. In the face of this abuse, the command from Allah (SWT) was to remain patient and steadfast, and not to respond to any insult, provocation, or physical harm. Just like the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions (RAA), every believer must face these insults during the course of the struggle to establish Islam, the patient endurance of which serves to control and discipline the *nafs*. Similarly, there can be no struggle for Islam without the expenditure of money, time, and capabilities. At the same time, one endangers not only one's own wellbeing but also that of one's family by condemning and confronting tyranny and injustice. When, during the course of this mission, the stage of open conflict arrives, one has to put one's very own life on the line. At this stage, the two most fundamental biological instincts—preservation of the self and preservation of the species—have to be curtailed for the sake of a higher, spiritual ideal.

When does the *Iqamah Al-Deen* becomes the primary objective

The most important point to note in the context of this discussion is the following: Only one of two conditions can be present in a given society: either Islam is established and dominant as a politico-socio-economic order, or it has been relegated to the private affairs of the individual. If Islam is dominant, then *Salat*, *Zakat*, *Saum*, and *Hajj* would be the primary means of disciplining and purifying the *nafs*, and one should also engage in supererogatory practices to further attain this goal. In the latter case, however, the mission of calling people to Islam and striving to make it dominant will take precedence over all supererogatory (or *nafl*) acts of worship. When Islam is weak and overpowered by forces of disbelief, primary attention has to be given to *Jihad* for the sake of Allah (SWT) as a means of disciplining and purifying the *nafs* and not to supererogatory acts of worships.

The importance of engaging in the struggle to establish Islam as it relates to the culturing of the *nafs* on the individual level is quite clear—this struggle is an exercise in disciplining the *nafs* so that the *ruh* may be enlightened and liberated. There is, however, another important and collective dimension to this struggle. The ultimate goal of the struggle for *Iqamah Al-Deen* is to establish a just and equitable society so that the opportunity is afforded to the greatest number of people to adopt the path of self-purification and spiritual enlightenment.

Struggle for purification: Individual or communal?

Imagine the selfishness and self-centeredness of an individual who has spent years roaming in the deserts, isolated on mountaintops, or living in the jungles—all for the sake of his own spiritual enlightenment. This person undertakes all sorts of difficult exercises and risks in order to cleanse, purify, and refine his own self, while the vast multitudes of his fellow human beings are condemned to an oppressive, wretched, and inhuman existence due to the tyranny of men who have set themselves up in the place of God. This multitude of humanity will not even be afforded the opportunity to ponder over ideals any higher or nobler than their

empty stomachs and tin-roof shacks. Whether the individual seeker actually attains spiritual enlightenment or not, that point is totally irrelevant for the vast majority of human beings—the wretched of the earth. The efforts on the part of this individual to reach the heights of spiritual enlightenment are self-centered and totally divorced from the altruistic struggle to establish justice. Whatever may be the ultimate outcome of this effort in the eyes of Allah (SWT), from a sociological point of view we can state with absolute confidence that selfishness and self-centeredness negate all higher spiritual values.

It has been detailed in my treatise *The Objective and Goal of Muhammad's Prophethood* ﷺ that the advent of the Last Prophet ﷺ took place at a critical juncture in human history. From his era onwards, the domain of individual liberty and freedom began to shrink and the domain of the collective system began to expand dramatically. In other words, it became progressively more difficult for the individual to shape his or her own life, free from the influence of the collective system in place. This tyranny has reached its absolute climax in the modern secular society where the very hopes, fears, and dreams of the individual are engineered by a corporate system over which he or she has no control. For the masses of humanity who are not privileged to enjoy the fruits of the modern corporate-consumer culture, political tyranny combines with economic destitution and a grossly unjust social stratification to produce a society where no individual can possibly assert his or her individuality. The *hadith* of the Prophet ﷺ—“Poverty leads towards disbelief”—has a direct bearing on this subject. Indeed, if the scrooges of hunger, indigence, and despair do not actually produce disbelief, they definitely have the effect of making the individual heedless and forgetful of Allah (SWT). This idea is expressed by Faiz Ahmad Faiz in an Urdu couplet, translated as follows:

*Life has alienated me,
From the contemplation of your beauty;
More entrancing than even you
Are the sorrows of this world.*

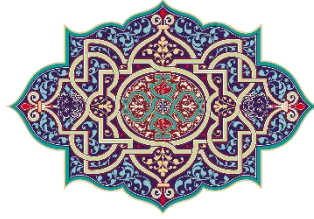
Shah Waliullah (RA) has offered a very penetrating analysis regarding the relationship between extreme wealth, grinding poverty, and the condition of religion in society. He says that the unjust distribution of wealth in society eventually leads to its concentration in the hands of a tiny elite. The elite possessing this wealth indulge in luxury, extravagance, and opulence; it becomes immersed in all the vices that inevitably accompany such a lifestyle. The impoverished masses, on the other hand, find themselves trapped in a life of destitution and desperation, a life in which the procurement of the next meal becomes their central concern. Consequently, most of the people living in such a society begin to merely exist at the levels of animals—the rich because they choose to, the masses because they are forced to. In both cases, human beings become oblivious and forgetful of Allah (SWT). How can there be any hope of spiritual growth under such unjust socio-economic conditions?

3 levels of service to humanity

In this context, there is a very critical point to note about the religious concept of “service to humanity.” This concept has three different levels.

- ✽ On the most basic level it is the feeding, clothing, and sheltering of the poor and tending to the needs of the indigent. For an individual who is calling people towards Allah (SWT) and towards the light of truth, it is of great importance that he or she not only has sympathy and empathy for the poor and the needy, but that he or she actually serves them.
- ✽ The second level of “service to humanity” is to help human beings regarding their fate in the Hereafter. What good is it to temporarily allay the suffering of an individual in the worldly life, if he or she will not benefit from the Grace of Allah (SWT) in the Hereafter? Consequently, calling people to Islam so that they may benefit from Divine Grace in the Hereafter is a nobler level of “service to humanity.”
- ✽ The third level in this regard is to struggle for the freedom of the creatures of Allah (SWT) from bondage to the tyranny of despots, and to establish a just and equitable order in which all are free to develop their spiritual potential and to love, adore, and obey their Lord. This is the noblest of the three levels of “service to humanity” because it produces benefits in this world as well as in the Hereafter. Reducing the concept of “service to humanity” merely to the first level betrays a limited and distorted conception of religious obligations.

THE CURE FOR THE DISEASE



Now we turn to the issue of curing the ailment that has struck the soul of spirituality in Islam. The diagnosis has been clearly outlined in the foregoing paragraphs and the causes, characteristics, and manifestations of departure from the Prophetic model have also been spelled out. This much having been done, it is relatively easy to identify the cure. The cure is simple: Return to the Prophetic model that we find in vogue during the early years of Islam.

Returning to the Quran

Since the disease has two dimensions, the cure will also have to be two-pronged. Firstly, there must be *Rujoo` ilal-Qur'an*, i.e., the Muslims must turn their attention towards the Divine Word. The Holy Qur'an, the Final Revelation of Almighty Allah (SWT), must be accorded its central and pivotal place as the source of spiritual and moral enlightenment. The depth and breadth of *Iman* that can be attained from an intimate and organic relationship with the Qur'an cannot be had from any other source. Furthermore, it is the Qur'an—and nothing but the Qur'an—that can satiate the needs of an individual who aspires to attain *Iman* that has an intellectual dimension. It has been mentioned before that one can attain blind faith—genuine and intense—by staying in the company of righteous people and by strictly adhering to the *Shari'ah*. However, faith with an intellectual dimension can be acquired only through the Qur'an. The quest for gnosis and the search for the knowledge of reality free from all veils can only be satisfied by the Divine Word. I refer to some Persian couplets by Iqbal once again:

*To speak the truth, the Qur'an is not just a book,
It is altogether a different thing.
When it penetrates into the soul,
The soul becomes entirely different from what it was before;
And when the soul changes, the whole world is transformed!*

He further explains:

*To kill the Iblees is difficult,
For he lives deep in the hidden nooks of the heart.
Better far would it be to convert him to Islam,
Kill him with the sword of the Qur'an.*

Two important dimensions of relationship with Quran

There is an important point regarding the recitation of the Qur'an that should be kept in mind. There are two dimensions of benefiting from the Divine Word:

- ✎ regular, constant, and repetitive recitation on the one hand and
- ✎ deep reflection, deliberation, and contemplation over its wisdom and meaning on the other.

A believer must relate to the Qur'an on both of these levels, i.e., regular recitation and careful deliberation. It is obvious, however, that there is a degree of tension between these two levels—more of one means less of the other. The more occupied one is in reciting the Qur'an, the less time one will have to deliberately ponder its meaning and message. The more time one spends carefully scrutinizing the wisdom that is implicit and explicit in the *ayaat* of the Qur'an, the less time one will have to recite it repetitively. This tension can be resolved in light of the pointer contained in the following *ayah*:

In time We shall make it plainly clear to them Our signs [in what they perceive] on the horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [Qur'an] is indeed the Truth... (Al-Fussilat 41:53)

It must be understood that the Qur'an uses inductive rather than deductive logic when putting forth arguments to draw the individual's attention towards Allah (SWT). It encourages and challenges the individual to look not only at the natural world but also in the depths of one's own being. Indeed, if one looks closely and intently enough one will find nothing but evidence of Divine Providence both in the world without and the world within.

Three types of ayat that we need to connect with

In light of the fore-cited *ayah*, we can say that there are three types of Divine *ayaat*:

- ✎ Qur'anic *ayaat*,
- ✎ The *ayaat* in the natural world, and
- ✎ The *ayaat* in one's own being.

Pondering these three types of *ayaat* and discovering the intimate relationship between them will result in the dormant consciousness being awakened followed by its rising to the level of clear consciousness. This is actually what is meant by “remembrance” and “reminder”—*tazakkur*—and this is what leads to genuine faith.

It is obvious that the amount of knowledge that has been accumulated regarding the natural world far outstrips anything that was known even a century ago. Consequently, with the rapid progress of scientific knowledge, fresh avenues are opening up that provide entirely new angles and insights into Qur’anic wisdom—angles and insights that are simply not available in the absence of this scientific knowledge. This development offers a profound opportunity and challenge for the modern believer because scientific developments are naturally moving in a direction that brings the intellectual dimension of *Tazkeer bil-Qur’an* (Reminder by the Qur’an) to the forefront.

Traditional sufi practices and the modern believer

This point was emphasized by Iqbal in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. He has argued that the methods and exercises which the *Sufis* of a bygone era had adopted in order to purify the *nafs* and liberate the spirit are simply too rigorous to be borne by the modern individual. In the present discussion, we have stressed the fact that these methods and exercises find no justification in the Prophetic method, but the observation by Iqbal sheds additional light on the subject—the fact that the moderns indeed are not capable of these rigorous exercises. In order to make up for this shortcoming, it is simply indispensable to emphasize the intellectual dimension of *Tazkeer bil-Qur’an*. The reason for this is the fact that the doors of scientific knowledge have been opened wide by Allah (SWT) in the modern era as never before in human history. By virtue of this opening, the depth and breadth of Qur’anic thought and wisdom have become apparent at unprecedented levels. This development actually serves as compensation for the rigorous physical exercises that were required in bygone days in order to attain spiritual enlightenment.

Returning to an active struggle for the Iqamah of Deen

In curing the disease, the second point is a return to the active struggle to establish the Kingdom of Allah (SWT) on earth as a means of countering the demands of the *nafs*. The obligatory modes of worship prescribed by the *Shari’ah* need to be the primary means of approaching the Divine, while the emphasis that was placed on supererogatory practices by the *Sufis* should be significantly decreased.

Out of these supererogatory practices, the ones that are rooted in the Prophetic model should be adhered to on an individual level as much as possible, but *Jihad* for the cause of Allah (SWT) has to become the primary means for the purposes of disciplining and culturing the *nafs*. It has already been mentioned that all the objectives of controlling the *nafs* that can

be achieved through the rigorous physical exercises of the *Sufis* can also be attained through the struggle against tyranny, oppression, and injustice—in other words, through the efforts to establish the *Deen* of Allah (SWT) in this world. The only difference is the fact that attaining this objective through the latter method is more authentically Prophetic and far more efficient.

The second point that needs to be kept in mind is that, at the current stage in history, the *Deen* of Allah (SWT) is not ascendant. Although Islam is not in the period of monarchical dominion either, it is, in the words of a Prophetic *hadith*, in the period of “alien strangeness.” Referring to his own Prophetic mission and projecting into the future, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has said: “Islam came into the world as a stranger, and it will once again become a stranger. Therefore, give glad tidings to the strangers.” When the Prophet ﷺ began his mission the concept of *Tauheed* had become so corrupt and diluted that its proper exposition sounded bizarre, not just to the pagan Arabs but also to the self-proclaimed adherents of monotheism: the Jews and the Christians. After this initial period of strangeness, Islam was established and the noble principle of *Tauheed* reigned supreme, but eventually, the principle of entropy set in and the period of decline began. Consequently, at the current juncture in history, the proper exposition of *Tauheed* sounds strange and bizarre even to the ears of the vast majority of Muslims, and Islam has once again become something alien. Therefore, it is logical and sensible that once again the struggle to establish the *Deen* of Allah (SWT) becomes the main focus of the Muslim, not only as a religious obligation but also as a means of combating the demands of the *nafs*.

In this context, it also needs to be mentioned that many of the obstacles that were present during the period of the medieval monarchy in relation to the struggle of making Islam supreme have been removed as a result of the evolution of social institutions. During medieval times there was no distinction between state and government, to oppose the government was to oppose the state. By extension, anyone opposing the state was a heretic, politically and religiously. However, the concept of human rights and the rights of the citizens have evolved over the past few hundred years. Today, the citizens of a state have the right to challenge the government within the limits of the Constitution. They have the rights of assembly, freedom of expression, and freedom of organization—rights that were not present in the medieval period. From a purely theoretical and Constitutional point of view, there are no restrictions on the citizens of the modern state to organize and campaign so that a genuinely Islamic form of governance comes into existence. By the Grace of Allah (SWT), this concept of citizens’ rights is most evolved in Pakistan among all the Muslim countries; some Muslim countries are still in the medieval period in this regard. Consequently, there are no external limitations on those who wish to choose this path as a means of disciplining the *nafs*, at least in our country. The sad fact, however, is that we have placed numerous limitations on ourselves, and we have developed a tendency to look for excuses.

Take benefit from this age of opportunities

In summary, the evolution of the physical sciences has opened the way to gain profound insights into the wisdom and profundity of the Qur'an—all of this to a degree that was not possible for the average believer in the pre-modern era. This provides ample opportunities for the development of a religious faith that has an intellectual dimension. At the same time, the evolution of the social sciences has made it possible for the average believer to legally and Constitutionally undertake a genuine struggle to make Islam supreme—again an opportunity that was not available to earlier generations who lived under the monarchy. This has made possible the disciplining and culturing of *nafs* in accordance with the practice of the Prophet ﷺ and the early Muslim community.

The conclusion of this argument has to return to the points that were made at the very outset.

- ✎ As far as the objectives and goals of *tasawwuf* are concerned, these are in full agreement with Islamic teachings. To put the matter more bluntly, the objectives and goals of *tasawwuf* are in fact the very core, the essence, and the spirit of Islam.
- ✎ However, during the course of Muslim history, *Sufi* thought and practice has significantly deviated from the Prophetic model in terms of the exact methodology to attain these objectives. A critical and objective academic study of *Sufism* and its comparison to the Prophetic life sufficiently illustrates this point. The advances made in comparative academic study is also a valuable tool in this regard—a tool that helps us critically analyze the subjects under study. I must agree with Maulana Amin Ahsan Islahi who has noted that the *Sufis* are the most genuine philosophers of Islam. The issues of ontology, epistemology, and that of the relationship between the two find their most authentic Islamic exposition in the words of the *Sufis* of Islam, not the “philosophers” of Islam.
- ✎ That much having been said, the arguments outlined in the preceding pages delineate the points on which I see major shortcomings in the institution of *tasawwuf*. For me the Qur'an is the ultimate criterion for analyzing, critiquing, and complimenting any given subject. In this regard, the example of the Prophet ﷺ—his life, his sayings, his doings, his non-doings—is just as important because his life is the most authentic commentary on the Qur'an.

I have attempted to examine the subject of *tasawwuf* by viewing it through the lenses of the clear and indisputable teachings of the Qur'an and the life history of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. If you find any benefit in it, it is due to the Grace of Allah (SWT); and if there is any defect in it, I beseech Allah (SWT) to grant me and you protection from any such defect.

The Reality of Tasawwuf

By one of the most notable scholars of 20th century

Dr. Israr Ahmed

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